The Liminal Experience of Pensacon

IDH 4030: Comics, Fandom, and Cosplay

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Pensacon is a three-day pop culture convention held in Pensacola, Florida. In 2024, I attended all three days and took notes about my experience being there. What stuck out to me the most was this strange feeling of unreality and wonder that contextualized the overall experience. The bulk of this paper will be dedicated to analyzing what this feeling is and what things within Pensacon brought it out.

First, I want to clearly define what I mean when I distinguish between real and unreal. For this paper, I find it most useful to conceptualize reality as a social construction. What things are, what they do, and what they mean, are all taught and reinforced through social interactions. A "feeling of unreality" would then describe the subjective experience of stepping into a place that deviates from how reality is usually constructed. This is not merely going into a difference social context; the implication here is that there exists some sort of cognitive dissonance between two realities. After all, if a person fully accepted the new one then there would be no need to use words like "unreal." Within the context of Pensacon, I consider the unreal broadly as anything that originates from the realm of image. This is a somewhat troublesome definition but it is workable enough for the purpose of this paper.

One major place where this sort of interaction is found within Pensacon is in the cosplayers, who exist as physical embodiments of fictional characters. The liminal space between real and not is created when a response toward the fictional character being cosplayed is felt despite us rationally knowing that we are merely seeing that character mediated through another person. As the character is not real and primarily exists as an image, similar sorts of responses exist when that character is seen on a TV or as a figurine, which I argue later still adds to the unreality when put in a space with many things which produce the same affect. What makes cosplay special however is that the character and the medium it resides -- a person -- are

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particularly close together in form, and therefore allows a greater amount of transference between the real and the fictional. One does not necessarily have to be intimately familiar with a character in order to feel this; many characters are designed such that they adhere to certain genre conventions any observer may be familiar with.

The cosplay existed against a backdrop of many other kinds of mediums through which the fictional was made more tangible. The Artist's Alley, Writer's Row and Vendor Floor were located inside a stadium within the convention center, where booths were visually themed according to the type of merchandise that they sold or the genre that they worked in. The guard standing near the entrance to the Vendor Floor would call cosplayers by their names or at least attempt to guess who they were, which I thought was a neat way of validating their fictional existence. Every thirty minutes, an announcer would deliver news. Often he said things in order to set the tone of what the experience should be, by welcoming people and saying things such as "we are family" and "only a handful of people like the things we like." Indeed, I found that ultimately, Pensacon's goal was fostering a sense of interfandom community through connecting disparate types of media and fandom expression by a shared sense of affect. The enthusiasm I encountered at Pensacon was infectious, and I found it everywhere I went. I saw many people complimenting other cosplayers and asking for pictures. For all three days at Pensacon, different people walked up to me and said that they liked my shirt. Going to the top of the stadium and surveying the crowd below, I was struck by how much love I could see at all stages. Love that sparked the creation of each of the characters walking around. Love that caused their respective media to get popular. Love that caused people to buy things and sell things and talk to each other and wait in lines and wear their favorite character's clothing for hours at a time. I felt it, even as a distant observer. I felt implicated in it, by virtue of being a person who too, liked things.

Galbraith (2009) states that *moe* is "a word used to describe a euphoric response to fantasy characters or representations of them." It is used within a Japanese fandom context, and while defined in a more generalized sense here and by Galbraith, is often associated with male otaku feelings for a type of fictional woman known as a *bishoujo*. Although I think much of the discourse surrounding it does not translate well to a American fandom context, there are some findings regarding *moe* that somewhat do. First of all, the real/unreal liminal space I outline near the beginning of the paper is explicitly identified within the context of maid cafes, a type of themed establishment in Japan where servers and customers roleplay maid and master. Honda (2005, 19), as translated by Galbraith, uses the metaphor of dimensions to describe it, identifying it as "a world positioned on the border of the two-dimensional and three-dimensional. … A vague 2.5 dimensional space like a maid café is a place where the two-dimensional concepts and delusions lingering in my soul can easily be brought into the three-dimensional world." Galbraith (2011) adds that "[i]nteracting with the imaginary other can function to keep one in a perpetual state of transition, an ongoing process of becoming where subject positions are fluid. While maid cafés do not represent a challenge to the capitalist system, they do provide an outlet for imagined alternatives, and the media spectacularisation of these spaces spreads that imagination." While the cosplay at Pensacon is hardly as ritualized in the ways that maid cafes are, it does serve as a more pronounced example of the psychological state of temporary engagement in fantasy that I am referring to, and arguably serves the same outlet function Galbraith describes.

Another useful finding is of *moe* being primarily a response towards the collection of traits that something represents rather than the thing as a fully realized entity. In the space of a convention, the representations of characters and worlds encountered must be swiftly processed and distilled into a flatter image than if it were engaged with in its source material. In its

decontextualization, the "virtual potential"[1] -- the imaginary possibility space of what something could be and/or do -- of these traits and connotations is made apparent. These images, freed from their respective narratives and juxtaposed together, create a makeshift 2.5-dimensional space within the environment where no one fantasy is given precedence over others. This effectively parallels the findings of Jenkins (1992, 24), who says that fans have "become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings."[2] Furthermore, this decentralization of the source of meaning places the onus on the congoer to "poach" their own meaning from Pensacon, which shows how fundamentally participatory fandom culture is.

Though I use concepts surrounding *moe* discourse because of how clearly it outlines the interplay between desire, image, and reality, I want to stress that *moe* itself comes from a different set of fan traditions and practices which are embroiled within Japanese culture and history. It could be argued that the popularity and influence of anime/manga within Western fandom comes with it a subconsciously reinterpreted and Westernized kind of *moe*, inspired by but functionally different from Japanese *moe*, but to fully discuss this point is outside the scope of this paper.

One last thing I want to argue for is the influence of the internet on the unreality of Pensacon. Online fans often present themselves in ways similar to cosplay, such as naming themselves after fictional characters or setting characters as their profile pictures. Sometimes, fans will use the word *kinning* to describe deeply relating to a character such that they see themselves in them (Drinstadiscourse 2020). Furries similarly tend to playfully present online as their fursona, such as referring to their hands as paws. There is even a fandom of sorts dedicated

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[1] I borrow this term from Galbraith (2009), who uses it in conjunction with the concept of the "body without organs" from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*.

[2] Hiroki Azuma takes a superficially similar stance in *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*.

to categorizing media by the perceived similarity of its virtual potentials, such as the classification *cottagecore*, which is supposed to evoke a "romanticized interpretation of Western agricultural life" (Fandom 2024). These things are all done on literal flat surfaces constructed entirely of image. In this way it functions inversely to convention spaces like Pensacon: instead of bringing images closer to reality, it brings reality closer to images. All of this contributes to the 2.5-dimensionality of online existence. Then when online fans interact in offline fandom, they translate their behavior accordingly, rendering what had been transformed into image back into physical reality again. Thus, the internet and the images it spawns are present in the psyches of congoers who actively use it.

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